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2010 Chevrolet Equinox Redesigned for 2010.

Overview

The Chevrolet Equinox is redesigned for 2010. That makes this the second generation of this crossover SUV. Though sized more like a midsize SUV, the Equinox has pricing and features of a compact SUV, though now with some luxury and technology amenities not expected in its price class.

The redesigned Equinox is about the same size as the outgoing model. But it has different styling inside and out and two new engine choices. The base engine is an upgraded version of the 2.4-liter four-cylinder that powered the last model. Thanks to direct injection, it now has more power and gets class-leading fuel economy of 32 mpg on the highway. Lots of sound insulation makes it quieter than most four-cylinders, too.

Equinox is also offered with a 3.0-liter V6 that replaces a 3.6-liter V6. It has similar power numbers at 264 horsepower, but it feels much less powerful than the larger V6 it replaces. In fact, we don't think it feels much more powerful than the capable four-cylinder, so we think the base engine is the best choice.

The new Equinox handles better than its predecessor. It is more carlike than the pre-2010 models, with less lean in turns. It's not sporty, but it's on par with its main competitors, including the Honda CR-V and Toyota RAV4. The ride is also quite good. We found that with either the standard 17- or available 18-inch wheels, the Equinox absorbs even sharp bumps without disrupting passenger comfort.

Inside, the Equinox has an attractively designed interior. There are some nice amenities, including ice blue ambient lighting, dual-zone automatic climate control, a hard-drive audio system, a dual-screen rear DVD entertainment system, and a power rear liftgate. The interior materials look and feel like hard plastic, though.

The Equinox offers plenty of space for passengers and cargo. The front seats are comfortable and supportive, and they have 10 inches of travel, so drivers of all sizes will fit. The useful MultiFlex rear seat carries over. It offers eight inches of travel, so tall passengers can ride in back or the driver can push the rear seat forward to carry more cargo.

Its roomy cabin and reasonable pricing make the 2010 Chevrolet Equinox attractive, and buyers can get some nice amenities they wouldn't expect in this price range. While the last model's handling was too sloppy for many, that problem has been remedied, making the Equinox a player in the entry crossover SUV market.

The 2010 Chevy Equinox is offered in LS, 1LT, 2LT and LTZ trim levels, each with front-wheel drive (2WD) or all-wheel drive (AWD). All models come standard with GM's Ecotec four-cylinder engine, now with direct injection technology that improves horsepower from 164 to 182 and torque from 160 to 172 pound-feet. Fuel economy is also improved, as GM says the 2.4-liter four cylinder will achieve 22/32 mpg (city/hwy) with 2WD and 20/29 with AWD. The transmission is a six-speed automatic with an Eco feature that alters the shift points to increase fuel economy by about 1 mpg.

Also offered is a 3.0-liter V6. A derivative of GM's 3.6-liter V6, this engine delivers 264 horsepower and 222 pound-feet of torque. GM quotes fuel economy estimates of 18/25 mpg with front-wheel drive and

17/24 mpg with all-wheel drive. The V6 also comes with a six-speed automatic transmission, but it adds a manual shiftgate.

Model Lineup

The 2010 Chevrolet Equinox LS 2WD (\$22,440) and LS AWD (\$24,190) come with cloth upholstery; air conditioning; cruise control; tilt/telescoping steering column; AM/FM/CD stereo; auxiliary input jack; XM satellite radio; power windows, locks and mirrors; remote keyless entry; four-way power driver's seat; 60/40 split-folding rear seat; driver information center; one year of the OnStar Safe and Sound plan; and P225/65R17 tires on painted alloy wheels.

Equinox LT 2WD (\$23,360) and LT AWD (\$25,110) get upgraded cloth upholstery, floor mats, a compass, tinted glass, heated mirrors and a roof rack. The 2LT (\$25,445) and 2LT AWD (\$27,195) get automatic climate control, leather-wrapped steering wheel with audio controls, eight-way power driver's seat, USB port, 250-watt Pioneer audio system, an auto-dimming rearview mirror with a rearview camera display, Bluetooth connectivity, remote engine starting, eight-way power driver's seat and fog lights.

Equinox LTZ (\$28,045) and LTZ AWD (\$29,795) add leather upholstery, a rear cargo cover, cargo net, roof rack cross bars, memory for the driver's seat and mirrors, heated front seats, rear park assist, automatic headlights, power rear liftgate and chrome exterior trim.

Options include a Cargo Management System (\$245) with a rear tonneau cover, a cargo net and roof rail crossbars; a Trailing package (\$350) with a 4-pin wire harness and a trailer hitch receiver; a Vehicle Interface Package (\$495) with Bluetooth connectivity, a USB port, remote engine starting and a leather-wrapped steering wheel with additional controls; power rear liftgate (\$495); sunroof (\$795); rear park assist (\$195); rearview camera (\$320); leather seats (\$1,050); heated front seats (\$250); 18-inch alloy wheels with P235/55R18 tires (\$250); and 19-inch wheels. The available navigation system has voice recognition and comes with a 40-gigabyte hard-drive, premium speakers and a USB port (\$2,145). The rear DVD entertainment system comes with a screen in the back of each front seat and the USB port (\$1,295).

Safety equipment includes dual threshold front airbags, curtain side airbags, front side airbags, a tire-pressure monitor, anti-lock brakes with brake assist, hill start assist, traction control, and GM's StabiliTrak electronic stability control. A rearview camera and rear park assist are optional, and we recommend them. All-wheel drive enhances stability in slippery conditions.

Walkaround

The Chevrolet Equinox is a small midsize crossover SUV that is priced and equipped to compete with compact SUVs. The Equinox uses a longer version of the Theta architecture that underpins the Saturn Vue, but the new model is about that same size as the old one. Theta is updated from the first-generation Equinox, and that's a good thing because the outgoing model didn't handle very well. The upcoming GMC Terrain will use the same platform.

Up front, the Equinox features Chevrolet's now-signature two-tier grille with gold bowtie insignia. The headlights wrap around the front fenders. Air ducts sit below the headlights and, in models so equipped, they house fog lights in chromed bezels that bisect the openings. The lower front fascia is charcoal-colored plastic and it has an air damn in the center. The LTZ model and the 2LT with the Chrome Appearance Package add metallic trim pieces to the lower portion of the air damn opening. The hood has three character lines and is shorter than the last one because Chevrolet moved the base of the windshield forward three inches, creating a more slippery shape. The new Equinox has a 0.36 coefficient of drag versus the 0.42 CD of the outgoing model.

Around the sides, the Equinox has pronounced fender flares and a wheels-at-the-corners stance, especially up front. The roof features wraparound side glass at the rear and tinted rear and rear side windows. All but the LS model has luggage side rails; they're charcoal on LT models and they add chrome inserts on the LTZ and the 2LT with the Chrome Appearance Package. That package also adds chrome door handles and side mirrors. Seventeen-inch aluminum wheels are standard and 18- and 19-inch wheels are available.

At the rear, the Equinox has dual round taillights, a takeoff of the Malibu design, and a roof spoiler. The tailgate opens upward, and a class-exclusive power, programmable tailgate is offered. Owners can program the tailgate to open to different heights so shorter drivers can reach it. Overall, the look is attractive. The LTZ's additional chrome trim adds a touch of class, especially with the chromed 19-inch wheels.

Interior Features

Chevrolet says the Equinox's interior is inspired by the interior of the successful Malibu midsize sedan. While that may be true when it comes to aesthetics, it's not true in terms of execution. The Equinox lacks the Malibu's soft-touch surfaces and thoughtful flourishes of chrome trim. Instead, like the Toyota RAV4 and Honda CR-V that Chevrolet benchmarked when developing this vehicle, the Equinox has hard plastic on the entirety of the dashboard, as well as on the center console and door panels. Elements of the Malibu's attractive double-cockpit design are there, but we'd like to see more soft-touch surfaces, tighter gaps and some wood, aluminum or chrome trim.

There are, however, some nice touches. The available ice blue ambient lighting is a delightful feature. It's standard on all models, but you get more as you go up the range. LS models have it on the center stack surround and in the center console cupholders. LTs add it on the instrument panel and center console, and the LTZ also gets it in the door handle recesses, in the footwells and in the doors' map pockets. The Equinox also offers some other amenities not expected in the class, including dual-zone automatic climate control, a hard-drive audio system and a dual-screen rear DVD entertainment system.

The instrument panel is attractive. The speedometer and tachometer feature white numbers and black backgrounds. They are set in large pods and in between are water temperature and fuel gauges, as well as a digital trip computer readout. The base interior has a storage cubby at the top of the center stack. When the navigation system is ordered, it sits in this spot. The controls on the center stack are grouped in a tight bunch, with the radio buttons up top and the climate controls at the bottom. With the navigation system, there are 43 buttons, dials and knobs. It's a bit less confusing without the navigation system, but it's going to take some getting used to. All of the controls are easy to reach, and the area is trimmed in a good-looking clear-coated silver-painted plastic.

Space is not a problem in the Equinox. Cloth or leather, the front seats are comfortable and supportive. GM obviously spent some money here. They are especially attractive in leather, with their two-tone coloring and contrast stitching. The front seats have 10 inches of travel and the steering wheel tilts and telescopes, so everyone from the very short to the very tall will be comfortable. The rear seat continues with the useful MultiFlex system, which includes a reclining feature and eight inches of travel fore and aft. With the rear seat all the way back, a tall rider can fit behind a tall driver. When the rear seat is pushed fully forward, rear cargo capacity is 31.4 cubic feet. The rear seat is also split 60/40 and it folds to open up a total of 63.7 cubic feet of cargo space. The load floor is fairly flat.

Driving Impressions

Anyone who avoided the first-generation Equinox due to its cumbersome handling characteristics no longer has to worry about that problem. The Equinox is now more carlike. The copious body lean is gone and passengers can ride in comfort without their heads being tossed side to side with every flick of the steering wheel. The steering is light and somewhat numb, and the brakes are easy to modulate, but the new Equinox is every bit as good as a Honda CR-V or Toyota RAV4 in terms of handling.

It rides well, too. With the standard 17-inch wheels, the Equinox absorbs even sharp bumps without disrupting passenger comfort. The available 18-inch wheels also provided a comfortable ride on rough Southeast Michigan streets. My only complaint is a bit of body drumming over washboard surfaces.

The standard 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine is upgraded this year with the addition of direct fuel injection, which improves both power and fuel economy. It provides usable power from a stop and on the highway, and it even offers decent passing punch. Chevrolet quotes a 0-60 mph time of 8.6 seconds for a front-wheel drive model, which is pretty quick for a four-cylinder-powered vehicle of this size.

Fuel economy for the 2.4-liter four-cylinder is an EPA-rated 22/32 mpg City/Highway on an Equinox with front-wheel drive. That's class-leading fuel economy. Not even the smaller RAV4 or CR-V can match the Equinox's 32 mpg Highway figure. And thanks to plenty of sound-deadening material and acoustic glass in the windshield and front windows, the 2.4-liter is smoother and quieter than most four-cylinder engines.

For 2010, Chevrolet switched from a 3.6-liter V6 to a 3.0-liter V6 as the top engine in the Equinox. While the horsepower rating is the same at 264 horses, the 3.0 has 28 less pound-feet of torque and, on the road, it feels considerably less powerful. (We didn't have EPA fuel economy ratings for the new 3.0-liter V6 at press time; the previous 3.6-liter V6 engine was rated 16/24 mpg, while the previous 3.4-liter V6 was rated 17/24 mpg.) We found the new 3.0-liter V6 doesn't feel that much stronger than the standard 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine. Chevy says a front-drive Equinox with the V6 can accelerate to 60 mph in 7.8 seconds. That's less than a second faster than the four-cylinder, and the V6 costs more while getting worse fuel economy.

In short, we recommend the four-cylinder models as being a better value.

Summary

The Chevy Equinox is sized like a midsize and priced like a compact. Equinox offers useful interior space for people and cargo, as well as class-leading fuel economy. It looks good, has a smooth, comfortable ride, and now handles much better than its predecessor. Small families looking to downsize from a large, inefficient SUV will find the Equinox a good value.

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